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From Where I Sit - Adapt, Survive, and Thrive

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Growing up in Australia in the 1950s, I was often asked what I would do when I left school. As a child who lived and worked on a grape and orange farm that my family had created in the middle of nowhere, I thought this was an odd question. Obviously I was going to be a farmer, like my father and my grandfather before me. I had no desire to run away to sea or to move to “the city”. Intergenerational and geographic mobility were not on my primary school curriculum, nor on the curriculum of any Australian child.

Yet the question seemed to fascinate everyone. And it endured across the years, even through six years of agricultural high school and into university. Great Aunt Ollicent never tired of it, asking the question on every one of her 20 annual visits. The same aunt, mystified by my inability to render her portrait in any medium despite a year of study for an arts degree, was sure I would come to a bad end. And of course, as a sophomore I lacked the skills to explain what I was studying, let alone why.

The question gives an insight into the era and the economy. There was no notion of trying something out; you were going to “be” a farmer for life. There was no notion of changing occupations or sectors. Nor was there any expectation that you would leave the countryside to look for work in the coastal cities, even though that was where the majority of jobs were found. Indeed, Uncle Colin was regarded as frivolous and feckless, and definitely unreliable, for changing jobs twice in his lifetime.

Nor was there any assumption that you would continue learning after leaving school. University participation was under 10 per cent, and entry to nursing and primary school teaching were certificate programmes with a lot of on-the-job practice.

Tinker, Tailor, Soldier, Sailor, the nursery rhyme we learned as two- and three-year-olds, taught us that occupations were fixed, invariable and determined by chance. It also taught us the class system and gender rules.

As it turns out, my generation changed jobs fairly often. The US Bureau of Labor Statistics estimates that the youngest baby boomers, those born in the late 1950s and early 1960s, held an average of 11 jobs between the ages of 18 and 44, whether men or women. Although the numbers are pushed up by the summer jobs that are a key part of the US economy, balancing that is the omission of jobs that changed around occupants because of process redesign, technological changes or simple shifts in client needs.

What does the future hold for people leaving school today? If they do not enter some form of higher education, their opportunities will be poor because job growth is skewed towards the higher skilled. In the US in 2008, three out of 10 jobs required some post-secondary education award, and it is projected that these occupations will account for more than 50 per cent of all new jobs between 2008 and 2018.

Conversely, posts depending on a year or more of on-the-job training have the slowest growth rates. And job losses are concentrated in production, office and administrative positions, with workers in the final sector losing out to technological change and automation.

So post-school qualifications are more important than ever. They are the pathways to a greater proportion of the economy. And they equip people with the foundations that allow them to change jobs, or to change as their jobs change. The soft powers of flexibility and adaptability are invaluable.